(b) Yes.

(c) There are approximately 3.5 million Indians in the Gulf countries and majority of them are workers.

(d) In most cases, there are no problems regarding return of Indian nationals to India. However, if required, the Indian Missions/Posts take up the cases with the local authorities and the employers and provide every possible assistance to those workers who want to return to India.

Racial discrimination against Indian nurses abroad

†1679. SHRI KALRAJ MISHRA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are aware of the fact that a discrimination is being made against Indian nurses and women in the foreign countries on the racial basis and they are also being deprived of promotions;

(b) if so, the details thereof; and

(c) whether Government have discussed the matter with foreign countries, and if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) No.

(b) and (c) Do not arise.

Indo-China Trade Talks

†1680. SHRI KALRAJ MISHRA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether any talk with regard to increase in trade have taken place recently during Indo-China talks;

(b) whether there is any scheme with regard to reopening of Indo-China silk route; and

(c) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Yes, Sir. The second meeting of

† Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.

India-China Joint Study Group (JSG) was held in New Delhi from July 26-28, 2004. The JSG which was agreed upon during the then Prime Minister Shri A.B. Vajpayee's visit to China in June, 2003, is composed of officials and economists to examine the potential complementarities between the two countries in expanded trade and economic cooperation. It will also, *inter alia,* draw up a programme for the development of India-China trade and economic cooperation for the next five years, aimed at encouraging greater cooperation between the business communities of both sides.

(b) and (c) There is no proposal at present to open any land route between India and China, other than those already existing for the border trade.

Attempt to release Indian hostages in Iraq

1681. SHRI K. B. KRISHNAMURTHY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether despite its avowed commitment to ideals of secularism, India has drawn a blank on its attempts to get three Indian hostages held in Iraq, released;

(b) whether India had explored the mediation of respected Muslim leaders like Yasser Arafat and other cleargies, in pursuance of its mission; and

(c) whether India has information that the Iraqi kidnappers were not politically motivated *jehadis,* but extortionists looking for ransom money?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Government is continuing its efforts to get three Indian hostages held in Iraq released. The efforts have contributed to getting the deadline set by the kidnappers extended, and to the safety and well-being of the hostages.

(br) With a view to securing the release of the hostages without being harmed, the Government has taken a number of steps including seeking assistance of influential religious leaders in the Arab World, who have issued appeals to kidnappers to release the hostages.

(c) The Government has no definitive information on the motivations of the Iraqi kidnappers.